

Lessons Learned from Reading First in Michigan

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A lot can be learned from the implementation of Reading First through examining teachers' practices!!

From the federally funded RF Implementation Evaluation, Final Report: "Reading First is a major federal initiative that builds on years of scientific research in reading to ensure that all children can read at or above grade level by the end of third grade" (p. 2).

Questions: Did teachers' practices conform to those recommended by reading researchers to ensure that children learn to read well? To what extent were promising research-based practices not implemented well—not given priority in the RF initiative?

Goal of this paper: to provide useful information for educators, particularly elementary teachers and school administrators in schools lagging behind achievement standards in Michigan.

Data sources

Classroom observations:

- ✓ Two studies of classroom practices (2005-2006; 2006-2007)
- ✓ Systematic observations of the literacy block
- ✓ Four visits to each of the participating classrooms.
- ✓ In the first year, 90 classrooms, K through grade 3; in the second year, 88 classrooms in grades 2 and 3.

Surveys

- ✓ All RF teachers completed surveys three times a year
- ✓ Teachers responded to questions about their practices, their satisfaction with their work, and other related topics.

Details about the design and implementation of the classroom practices studies are available from the first author on request.

Background

Michigan was at the forefront of the Reading First initiative.

- ✓ It was one of the first states to have its plan approved by the US Department of Education.
- ✓ It was one of the first states to implement their program statewide, starting in the summer of 2002
- ✓ State RF program directors, facilitators, and district personnel were responsible for overseeing the implementation of the RF plans in all participating districts and schools.
- ✓ As evaluators, we participated in the process of collecting test data, providing the state with an annual progress report, and providing technical assistance as needed.

In the fall of 2005, participating in Michigan's Reading First were 32 Round 1 schools (those that started in 2002), 60 Round 2 schools (those that started in 2003), and 66 Round 3 schools. As of 2005, more than 1,750 teachers were implementing the RF program in their school.

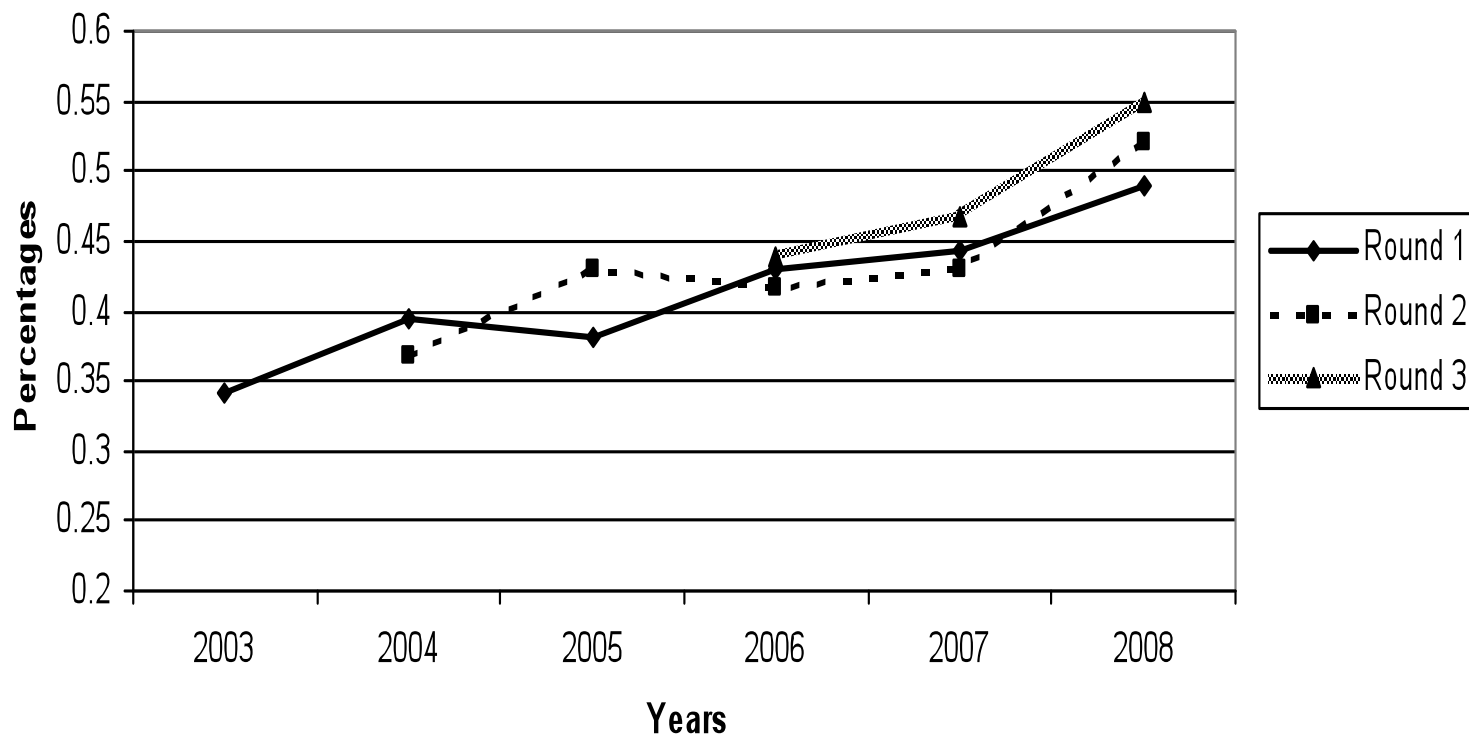
The goals of RF:

- ✓ The provisions of the RF legislation were intended to improve teachers' instruction in reading, which in turn would lead to improved reading achievement in high poverty schools.
- ✓ The U.S. Department of Education's guidance for RF (U.S. Department of Education, April 2002) set the expectation that all students would be reading at grade level by the end of third grade.
- ✓ This set a high standard: few students in high poverty schools in Michigan (grades 1-3) were reading at grade level, even at the end of their first year in the RF program.

Results

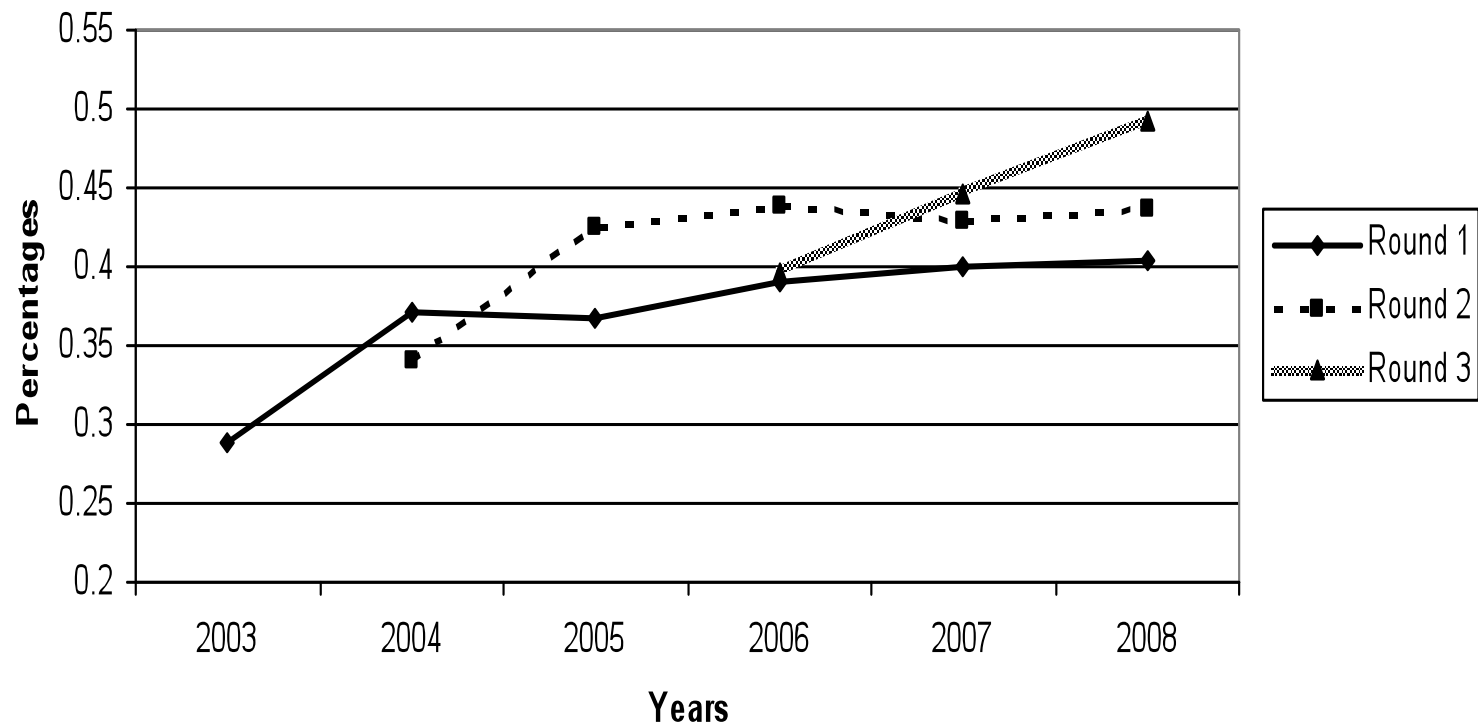
Improvement in the percentage of students whose reading comprehension was at or above grade level across the years of RF were overall modest. Students in RF schools in Michigan made significant gains in first and second grade, but this was not the case for third graders (Carlisle, Cortina, & Zeng, 2010).

Percentage Meeting Grade Level Expectations on Reading Comprehension for Grade 1

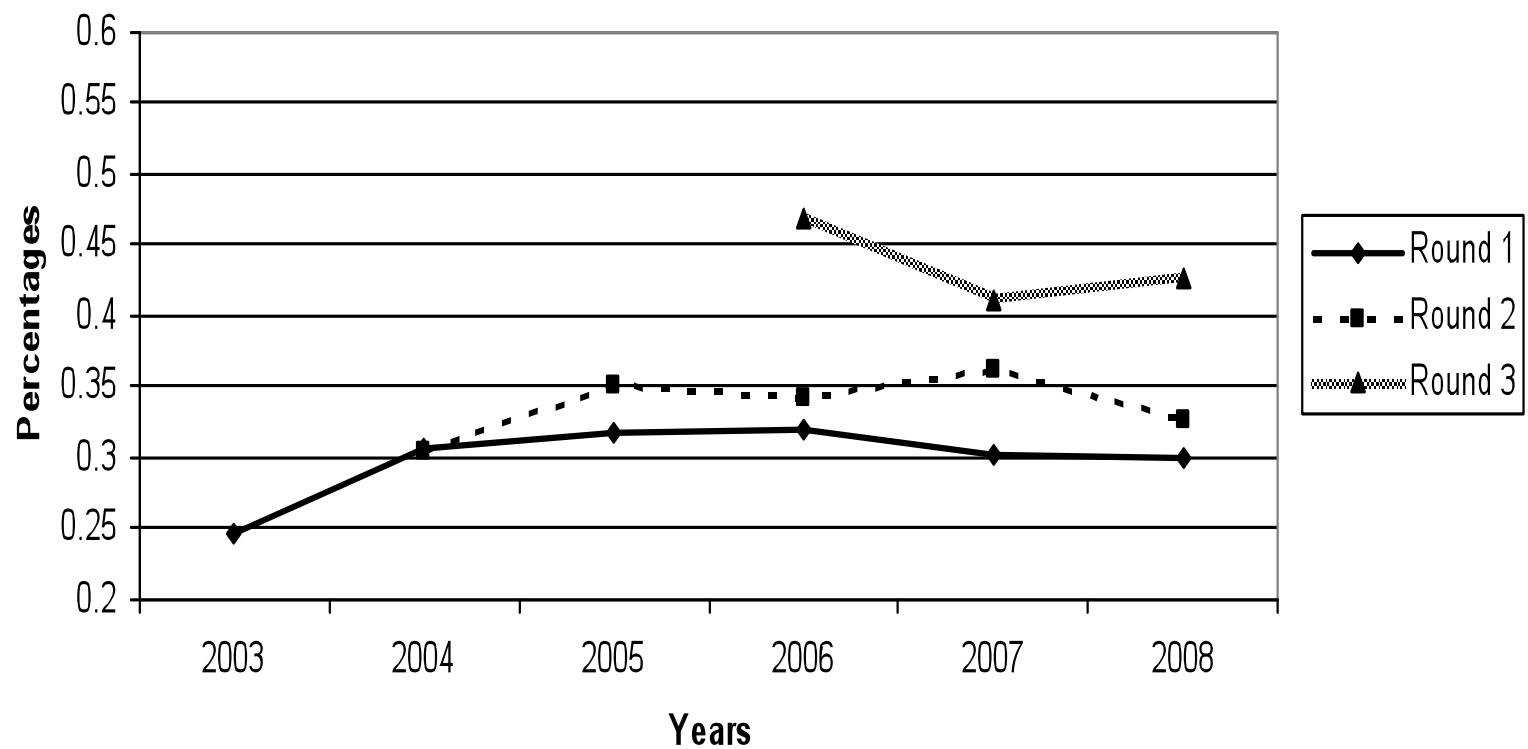


(From Carlisle, Cortina & Zeng, 2010)

Percentage Meeting Grade Level Expectations on Reading Comprehension for Grade 2



Percentage Meeting Grade Level Expectations on Reading Comprehension for Grade 3



Our purpose is to share important “lessons learned” that might be valuable to other teachers and school administrators. We focus on findings that appear to play a critical role in the quality of instruction for early elementary students in high poverty schools.

We present four important “lessons” in each of two categories.

- ✓The first category involves literacy instructional practices that confirm what we might expect, given research on early literacy for underachieving students and students at risk for reading difficulties available at the time the NCLB Act was passed. Our findings suggest that these were effective practices in the RF program in Michigan.

- ✓The second category involves research-supported practices that differed from or did not comply with experts’ recommendations. They might have been implemented but not implemented well, given our examination of students’ gains in reading achievement.

Confirmation of Effective Practices:

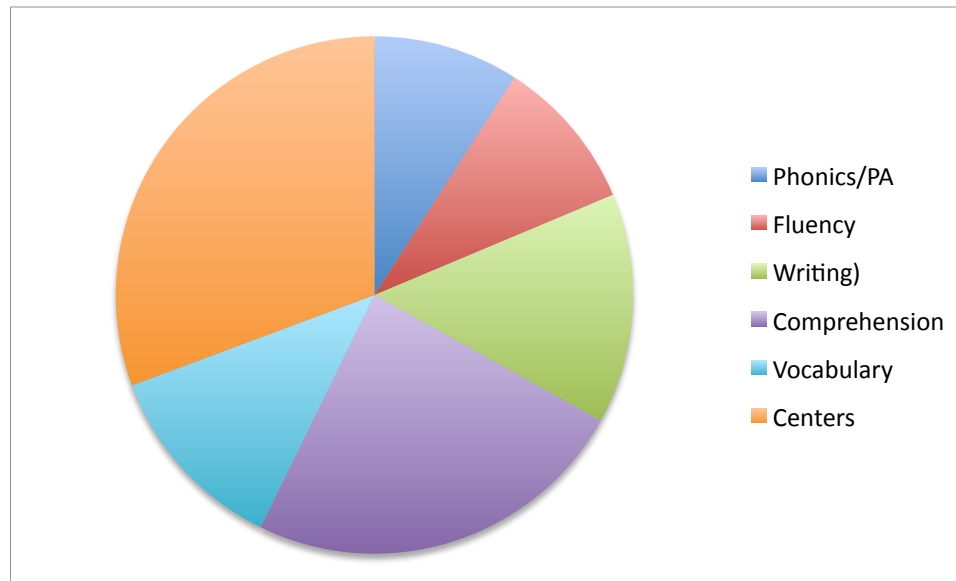
- ✓ Provide Instruction as Guided by the Comprehensive Program
- ✓ Make Use of Flexible Grouping and Differentiated Instruction
- ✓ Provide Systematic, Explicit Instruction
- ✓ Set Up Procedures and Maintain Support for School-Wide Collaboration

The comprehensive programs provided a way to address all 5 components with sufficient materials to meet the needs of beginning readers:

Reading research shows that both the development of basic skills *and* opportunities to use these in authentic reading and writing activities are critical features of effective instruction in early elementary reading instruction. Moats (1999) and other recommended that comprehensive programs that met “criteria” of scientifically-based research would provide structure, coverage of necessary content, and resources for struggling readers—useful to coordinate instruction within and across classrooms.

Our observations showed that, overall, teachers varied in the amount of time spent on the five components required by Reading First but tended to use the comprehensive program more for instruction in some areas than others (e.g., more in reading comprehension than phonics).

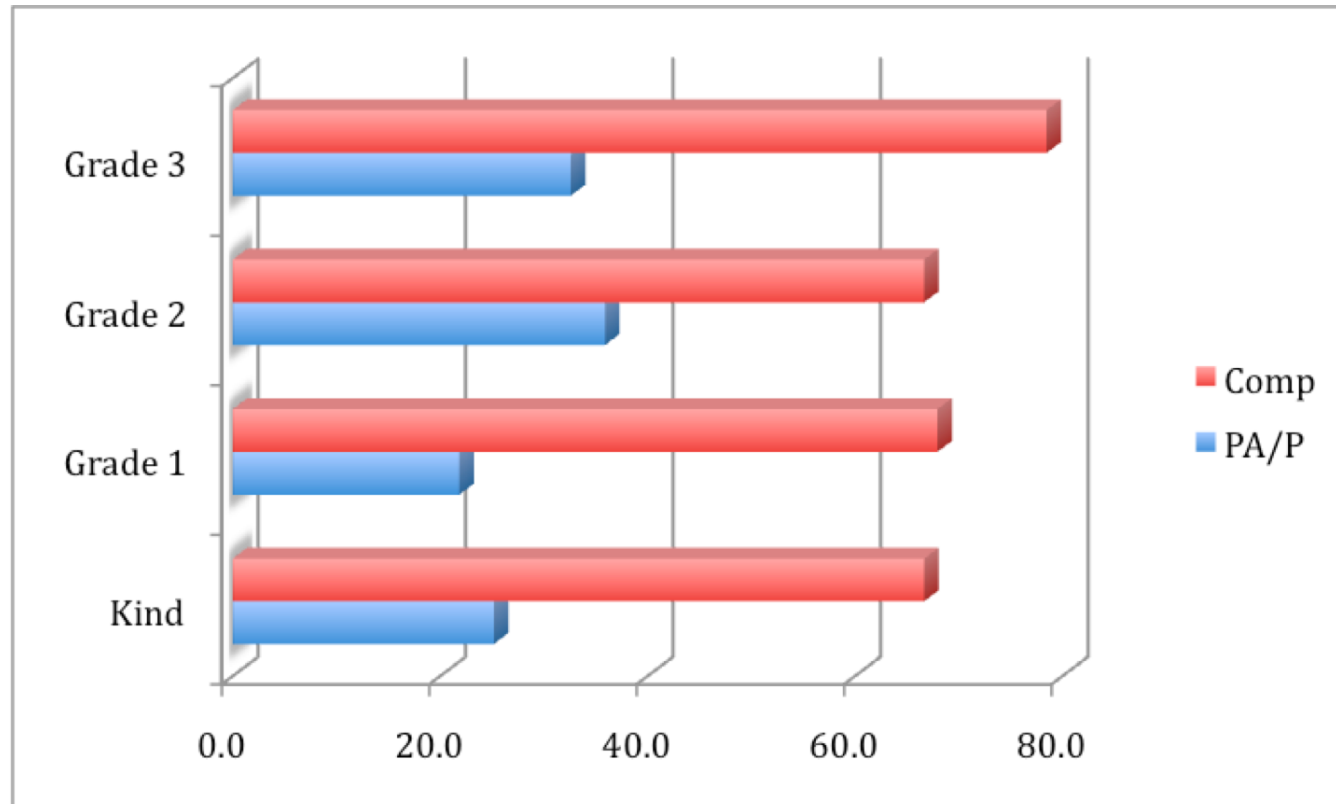
Proportion of lessons for different literacy purposes in second and third grade classrooms



**Percent of Lessons with Different Purposes
(Grade 2 and 3 Classrooms, 2006-2007)**

Purpose	Grade 2	Grade 3
Phonics	10.8%	6.4%
Fluency	8.3%	10.2%
Writing	15.7%	11.8%
Comprehension	21.3%	25.5%
Vocabulary	10.7%	12.6%
Assessment	2.7%	5.0%
Centers	30.5%	28.4%

: Use of the comprehension program for phonological awareness/phonics and comprehension lessons in the fall observation by grade level.



Teachers' views of the comprehensive program

Reading First required the use of a comprehensive program to guide reading instruction as a way to provide scientifically-based reading instruction. Did this work well for teachers?

- ✓ We asked teachers to respond to a survey with questions about their practices.
- ✓ One item read, *“Reading materials and lesson in the comprehensive program provide me with an effective way to meet the learning needs of all my students.”*
- ✓ Of the 1,672 teachers who responded to this item, 82 percent strongly agreed with this statement.

Sequence of lessons in one second-grade teachers' literacy block

Purpose	Content/activity	Grouping	Duration
Lesson 1: Word study	Word sorts involving vowel-r words	Whole class	14 min
Lesson 2: reading comprehension	Making inferences, based on story from anthology	Whole class	9 min
Lesson 3: Fluency	Pairs of students re-read story to each other; teacher assisted different pairs of students	Pairs	25 min
Lesson 4: Comprehension	Story structure; students completed a chart of story elements from a small book	Small group (other students in literacy centers)	34 minutes
Lesson 5: Comprehension	Inference, extending concept from earlier whole class lesson, based on "Driscoll and the Singing Fish"	Small group	11 min
Lesson 6: Vocabulary	Game that involved matching words and definitions (akin to Bingo)	Whole class	15 min

Flexible grouping and differentiated instruction:

Reading research: Making use of different grouping arrangements was recommended by reading researchers. Focus was particularly on the use of small groups to provide differentiated instruction.

Our studies:

- ✓ Analysis of classroom observation showed that, on average, second- and third-grade teachers taught 5 or 6 different lessons in a literacy block that lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.
- ✓ Of all the lessons, 59.3% of lessons were *whole class*..
- ✓ In one study, time spent working with students in *small groups* (during literacy centers time) contributed to first graders' gains on DIBELS Nonsense Word Reading (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2009).
- ✓ In another study, teachers provided more support for students' learning from texts when they are working with students in small groups than when they are teaching the whole class (Carlisle, Dwyer, Learned, & Berebitsky, April 2011).

Survey of teachers' views of differentiated instruction within their school: Sample items (Fall 2007)

Sample of items from scale:	% strongly agree*
Teachers in this school . . .	
. . . use a wide range of assignments, materials, or activities matched to students' needs and skill levels	81.5
. . . use flexible grouping in their classrooms	85.2
. . . provide several activities in class so that students can choose from among them	70.1
. . . frequently use assessments to help them decide what their students need next	87.7

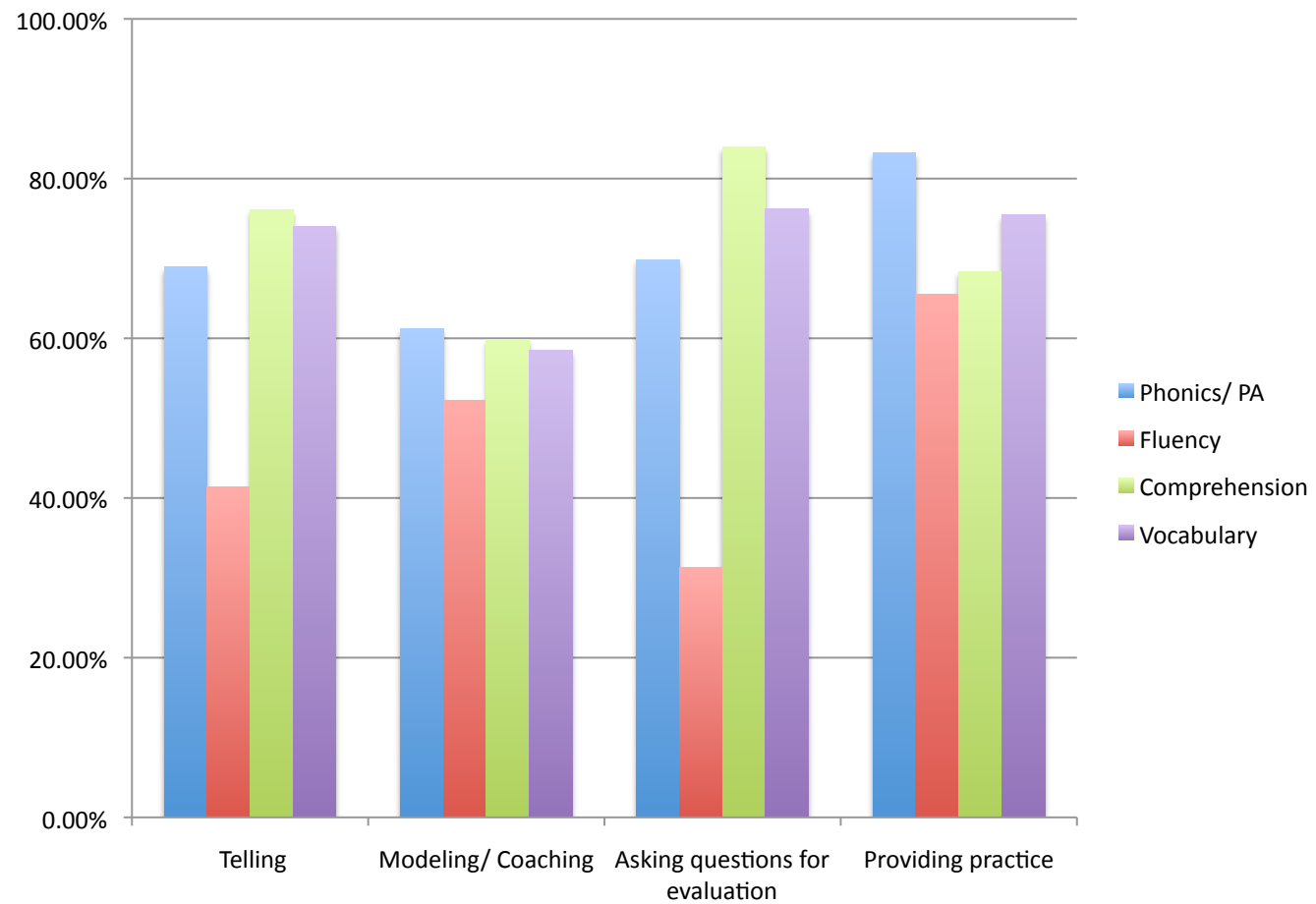
* Teachers marked a response that showed their agreement with the statement between the extremes of 0 (for *not at all*) and 7 (for *completely*). "Strongly agree" was indicated by marking levels 5, 6, or 7.

Teachers' instructional actions: Of three dimensions, teacher-directed instruction has a major role, similar to “explicit” instruction

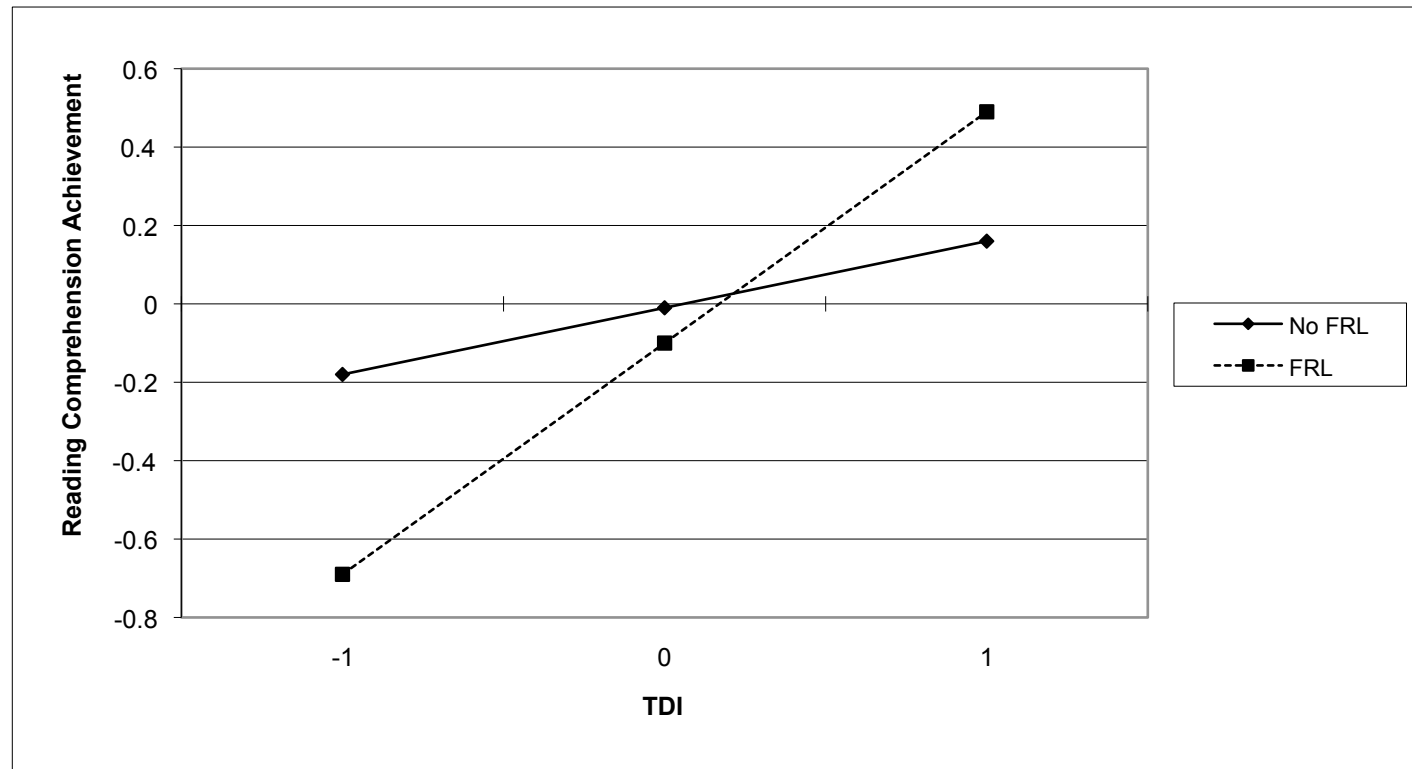
Theoretical Dimension	Instructional Action	Proportion of Lessons in which the action was observed (<i>n</i> =287)
Pedagogical Structure	Explaining the purpose of the lesson	0.36
	Explaining the value/relevance of the lesson	0.09
	Giving directions for activity	0.78
	Providing a wrap up or summary of what has been accomplished	0.13
Teacher- directed instruction	Telling	0.77
	Modeling/Coaching	0.61
	Asking questions for evaluation	0.85
	Providing practice or review activities	0.69
Support for Student Learning	Fostering discussion	0.29
	Assessing students' work; providing feedback	0.22
	Gives students an opportunity to ask questions	0.10

From Carlisle, Kelcey, Berebitsky, & Phelps, 2010

Percent of lessons in which four teacher-directed instructional actions were observed



Interaction of Reading Comprehension Achievement and Teacher-Directed Instruction: Breakdown by Students' Eligibility for Free or Reduced Price Lunch



Note. The TDI values are standardized coefficients; negative 1 represents below average use of TDI, positive 1 represents above average use of TDI .

School-wide collaboration:

Research: Improvements in the quality of instruction (of the kind that lead to improvements in students' achievement) is unlikely to come about unless there is substantial opportunity for teachers and administrators to work together to develop a cohesive plan and mechanisms for learning about and carrying out effective instruction.

Our study:

Teachers responded to statements about school support, opportunities to collaborate, and means of communication between teachers and their principal around literacy instruction (Berebitsky, Goddard, Carlisle & Feng, 2009). (See next slide for examples.)

Results:

The more teachers reported that their principal supported their efforts to improve reading instruction, the more likely they were to engage in regular, high quality communication around issues of literacy. Preliminary results from a follow-up study suggest that extent of collaboration contributed to gains in student achievement.

Sample items from “communication around literacy” scale (2007)

Statement (teachers were asked to express agreement)	% strongly agree*
Instructional leaders from my school have helped me understand how to use data from student assessments to make instructional decisions	86.4
I benefit from discussing ideas about teaching with other teachers in my school.	97.8
Weekly grade level meetings are a valuable opportunity to collaborate with colleagues on issues related to literacy	80.7
I wish there was more building-level communication about how to implement the reading curriculum.	65.4

* Teachers marked a response that showed their agreement with the statement between the extremes of 0 (for *not at all*) and 7 (for *completely*). “Strongly agree” was indicated by marking levels 5, 6, or 7. About 1742 teacher responded to each item.

Collaboration from the perspective of special educators:

✓ **Data source:** online survey carried out in 2008. The purpose was to gain insight into the impact of policy changes on the knowledge and practices of special education teachers. Completed by 155 special education teachers in Michigan, 65 in RF schools and 150 in other elementary schools. The two groups were comparable in terms of geographical location, professional degrees, years of teaching experience, number of special education endorsements, and current assignment.

✓ **Comparison of RF and Non-RF special education teachers** showed that RF provided opportunities for greater collaboration amongst special and general education teachers as well as instructional leaders.

✓ **This collaboration provided RF teachers with a sense of greater familiarity with the general education curriculum and a greater awareness of effective literacy instruction.**

Classroom Practices That Did Not Meet Expectations

- ✓ Provide Students with Cognitive Challenges
- ✓ Help Students Understand Reading Processes and Monitor Their Own Reading
- ✓ Provide Extensive Support for Vocabulary Learning
- ✓ Support Students' Interest, Engagement, and Learning

Providing instruction that is cognitively challenging:

The extent or level of cognitively challenging instruction is significantly related to students' gains in reading (e.g., Taylor et al., 2001).

Our study: During observations in 90 kindergarten through grade 3 classrooms in 2005-2006, observers noted the presence of any of five cognitively challenging interactions during lessons of literacy instruction (e.g., engaging students in analysis of texts.)

Results: very few instances of cognitive challenge were observed.

Teacher-student interactions signaling cognitive engagement

1. Teacher and student(s) are discussing the meaning of a word or text

(e.g., the teacher and students share ideas about its meaning of a text, using the text to support their interpretations).

2. Teacher and student(s) suggest, apply, and monitor the use of

strategies (e.g., the teacher and students are working together to select, apply, and monitor the reading strategies).

3. Teacher and student(s) brainstorm ideas, information, and solutions to

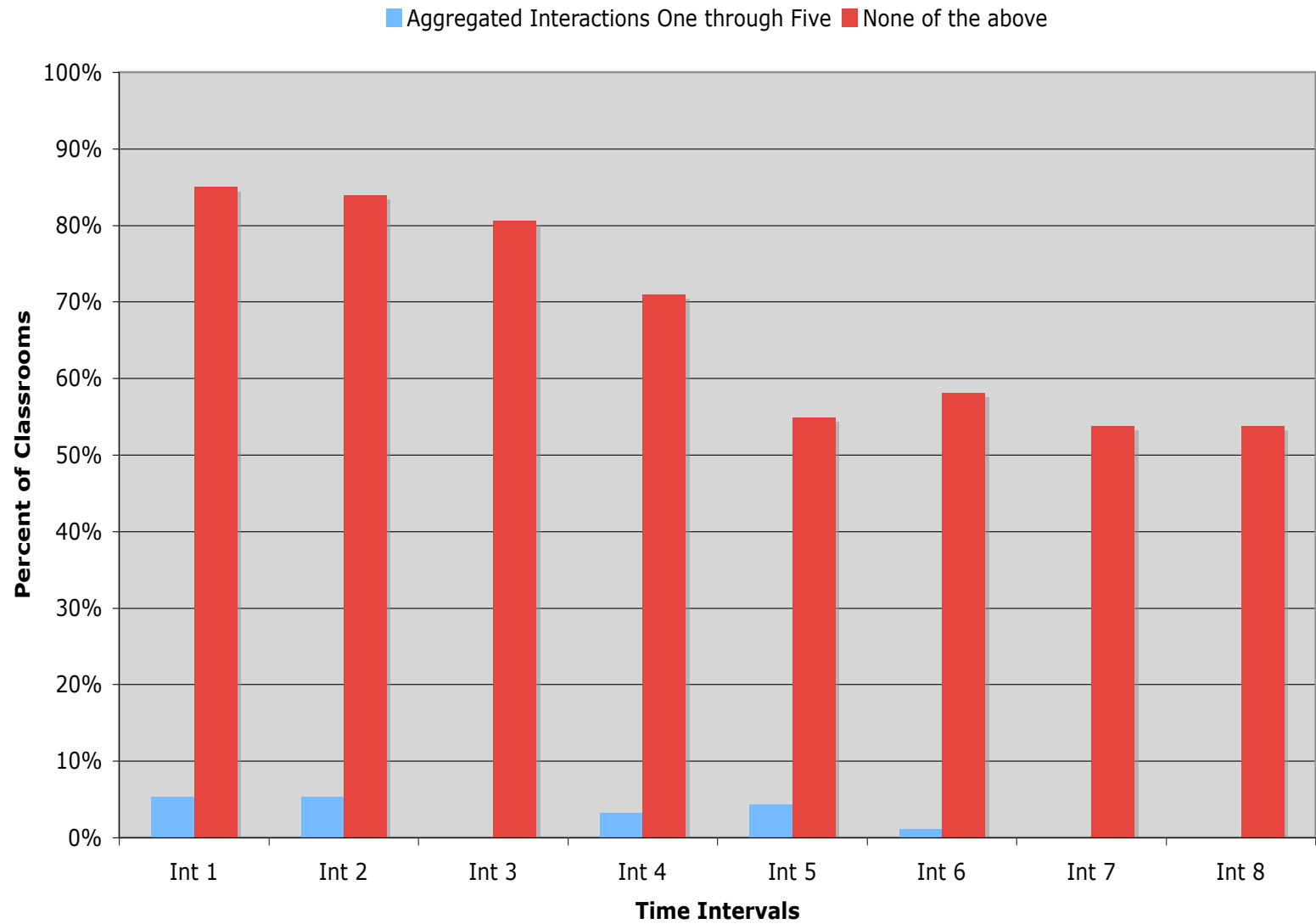
problems (e.g., together, the teacher and students generate a list of questions about a text or about the meaning of a word).

4. Teacher and student(s) analyze words and sentences (e.g., the teacher

and student(s) carry out analysis of linguistic structure, examining form-meaning relations).

5. Teacher and student(s) discuss compositions written by one or more students (e.g., participating in Author's Chair activity or a writing conference with an individual student)

Fall 2006 Interactions: Third Grade



Helping student's understand reading processes and purposes

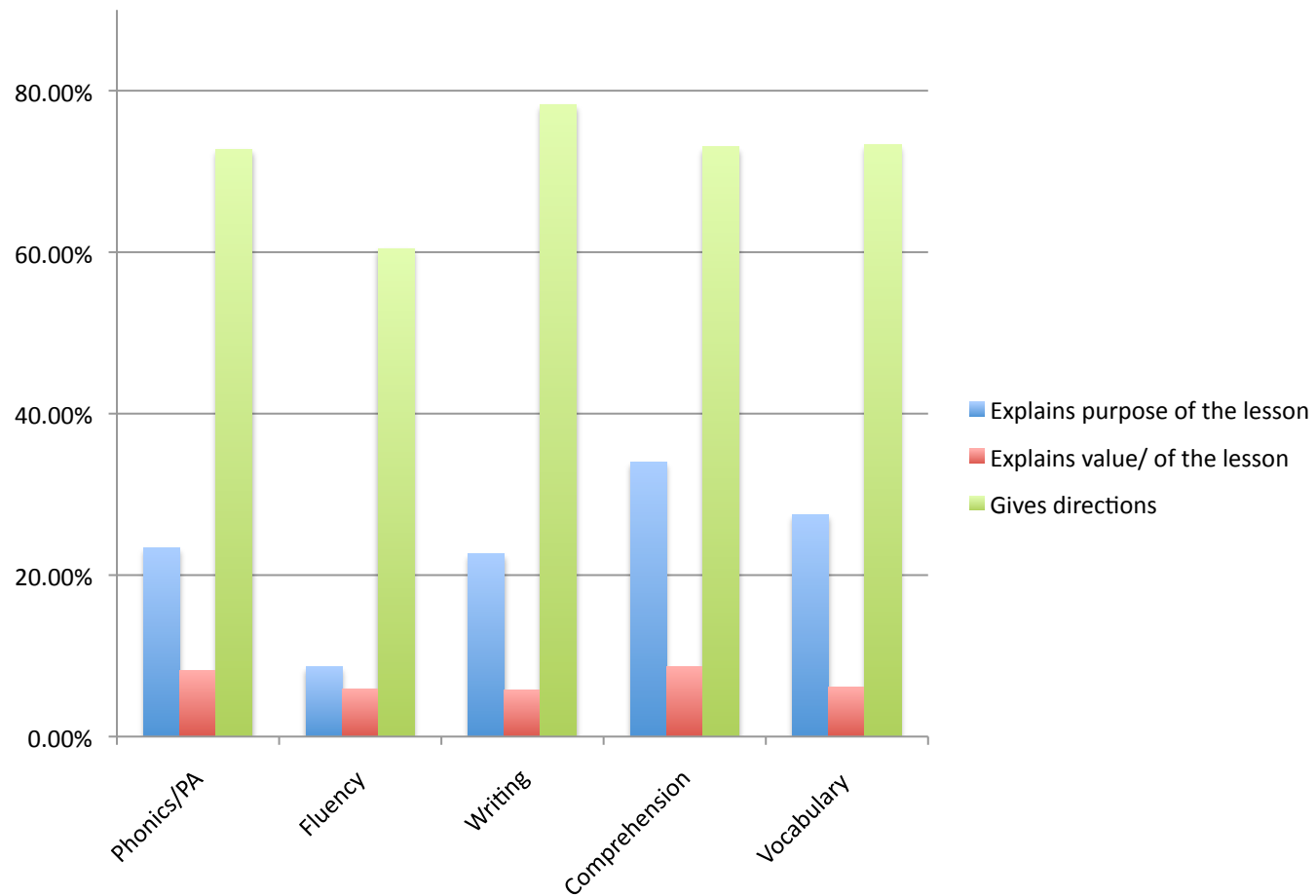
Reading research: Teachers should help young readers understand reading processes and learn to understand and take responsibility for their own reading; self-regulation becomes a key factor when students are reading texts independently (e.g., Perry & VandeKamp, 2000).

Teachers can take actions to engage students' interest in what they are learning and why..

- ✓ Achieving the literacy goals for each student becomes partly the responsibility of the student, not just the plan and goal of the teacher.
- ✓ Teachers can explain to students what they hope they will learn from a given lesson and why this is important.
- ✓ Teachers can provide constructive feedback to students so they know what they are good at and what they still need to work on.

Our study results: Teachers often gave directions for lessons and specific activities but seldom explained the value of the lesson for the students.

Supporting students' understanding of reading: Percent of lessons in which three instructional actions to provide structure for students' understanding of reading were observed



Supporting students' engagement and interest:

Reading research: There are decided benefits to engaging students' interest in reading and involvement in reading activities (e.g., Guthrie & Ozgungor, 2002). Students who are motivated to read are more likely to make gains in their reading achievement than those who are not invested in reading.

Our study: We coded teachers' instructional actions intended to engage students' interest and involvement in literacy lessons. These included *fostering discussion, giving students chances to ask questions (e.g., clarify points of confusion), and providing feedback to students about their performance or progress.*

Results: In reading comprehension lessons, the more teachers used these instructional actions, the greater the gains on the ITBS Reading Comprehension measure (when taking lesson features, classroom demographics, and teacher characteristics into account)

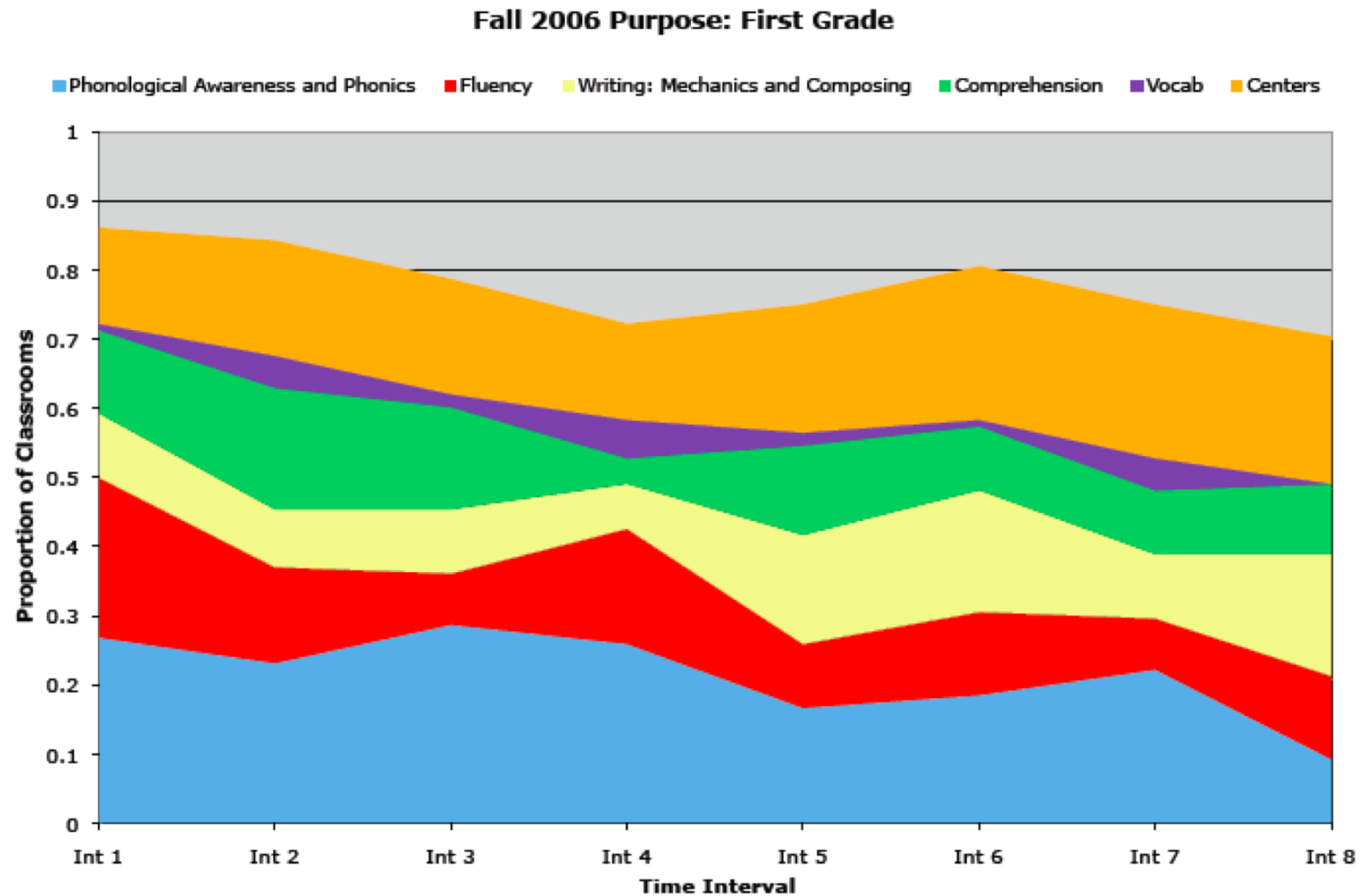
Vocabulary instruction:

Research base: Effective vocabulary instruction is especially critical for students whose reading comprehension lags behind that of their peers. Vocabulary knowledge is significantly related to reading comprehension achievement (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller, 2004).

To catch up to their peers, vocabulary-disadvantaged students need to acquire vocabulary at an above-average rate. For such students, vocabulary instruction must involve direct teaching of high frequency words and words in texts that students read.

Teachers must also take advantage of “teachable moments”-- opportunities to engage students in learning words that come up incidentally throughout the school day.

Average time spent on different literacy purposes across the 90-minute block in first-grade classrooms in the fall



Study of teachers' vocabulary instruction:

Purpose: to determine the extent to which teachers in high poverty schools provided their students with the kinds of intensive and extensive opportunities needed to make substantial gains in their vocabulary

Method: we coded teachers' use of five discourse actions that varied in attention to depth of understanding of a word's meaning and engagement of the students.

General finding: Of the 1,068 observed lessons, 13.3% had vocabulary as the primary purpose with an average duration of 12.7 minutes (11.7 SD).

Teachers' discourse actions:

- (a) the teacher provides the definition of the target word to the students;
- (b) the teacher guides students in examining the word as used in context;
- (c) the teacher asks students to use or read a word as it is used in a sentence (often taken from the text);
- (d) the teachers engages students in discussion of word meanings; and
- (e) the teacher asks students to define words themselves.

Vocabulary instruction

Purpose of Lessons in Which Teachers' Discourse Actions Were Observed (Percentages)

The teacher:	All Lessons	Phonics	Fluency	Writing	Comp.	Vocab.	Small group reading lessons
Defines a word or word part	26.2	26.4	7.0	15.0	31.0	46.5	24.5
Examines word in context	24.1	9.7	9.6	13.5	25.8	41.5	27.6
Asks students to use/read word in sentence	31.6	23.6	11.3	14.3	44.6	64.1	21.6
Asks students to give meaning of word	9.5	2.8	1.7	4.5	2.8	16.9	18.5
Fosters discussion	7.6	4.2	1.7	3.0	7.0	16.9	8.8
Any Word Interaction	50.3	38.9	18.3	32.3	60.3	83.1	48.3

Relation of vocabulary instruction and gains in reading comprehension:

Taking context into account, we found that the extent of teachers' engagement in word instruction was associated with student achievement in reading comprehension in high- and low-performing classrooms (based on the student's average prior achievement ITBS reading comprehension subtest).

We separated classes into two groups—those above and those below the median classroom.

Adjusting for baseline differences, the results suggested that teachers' engagement in vocabulary instruction contributed to students' gains in reading comprehension in classrooms with lower prior comprehension scores but not to gains in achievement in classrooms with above average comprehension.

Summary:

Reading First in Michigan appeared to implement the aspects of instruction that were central to the initiative with quality and reasonably good results. These derived from reading research, and so we can see substantially complementary findings.

This includes systematic instruction (through use of the comprehensive program, explicit instruction, flexible grouping/differentiated instruction, and school-wide collaboration. Further, a collective school commitment to working toward the program goals (with support from the principal) was critical.

Areas which the program did not implement strong recommendations of researchers included helping students acquire understanding and control of their own reading, using various methods to engage students' interest and motivation, challenging students to think and reason, and providing sufficient instruction in vocabulary.

Recommendations:

It is *important to remember* that our results speak to trends over time without an implication that all teachers' practices were the same. Overall, we found lots of variation in teachers' use of time for different purposes, the grouping arrangements they preferred, the materials they used, and so on.

We do not know why many of the most important practices were rarely observed in Reading First classrooms (e.g., challenging students to reason); however, other researchers have reported similar findings (e.g., Taylor et al., 2002).

The results of our studies account to some extent for gains in students' reading, but it is not appropriate to infer that the findings explain why Reading First was not more effective especially in third grade. Many factors other than reading instruction affect the quality of implementation and students' reading achievement.

Nonetheless, it would be wonderful indeed if other teachers can learn from the results of the Reading First program in Michigan.

With the assistance of Anita Vereb, Dan Berebitsky, Ji Zeng, Kai Cortina, Deng Feng, and others.

With special thanks to the teachers who made us feel welcome in their classrooms and tolerated our requests to complete surveys.

And not to forget the state program directors and facilitators who made our work as evaluators a pleasure to carry out.

For questions or a copy of the paper, contact me at:

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